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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN INDIA: CHANGING CHOICES OF WOMEN IN INDIAN
INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

¶1. (U) Summary: With each passing decade since 1950, increasing numbers of women in India enter into higher education, and the disciplines they are choosing to study have changed over time. While educational opportunities for women in India remain a study of contrasts, the women in four of Delhi's institutions of higher learning are developing the skills they need to enter the workforce or go on to postgraduate education; a choice they are increasingly making. Although some of these women take the traditional route and opt for marriage over career, gone are the days when college was merely finishing school for marriage. End Summary.

Increasing Numbers of Indian Women in Higher Education

¶2. (U) Institutes of higher education in India consist of colleges, universities, institutions of national importance (such as Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management and Indian Institutes of Science), autonomous institutions or "deemed universities" and research institutes. The most recent education statistics from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Higher Education, for 2005-06, published in 2008, count the number of institutions of higher learning nationwide at 21,259. The number of women enrolled these institutions has increased from 40,000 in 1950-51 to 5,491,818 in 2005-06. In 1950-51 women made up 10.9 of the student body compared to 38.34% in 2005-06.

Changing Disciplinary Choices for Women in India

¶3. (U) The disciplinary choices of Indian women have changed over time. Karuna Chanana, Professor of Sociology of Education and Gender, retired from the Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, compiled statistics on the proportion of men and women students to total enrolment by gender and discipline from 1950-51 to 2005-06. The statistics show that, while women have retained an interest in traditionally female disciplines such as education and arts, women have also been moving into disciplines that have been historically dominated by men. For example, the percentage of women studying science has steadily increased each decade from a low of 7.1% in 1950-51 to 40% in 2005-06. A similar pattern has occurred in commerce (0.6% in 1950-51 to 37.1% in 2005-06), engineering/tech (0.2% in 1950-51 to 23.4% in 2005-06), law (2.1% in 1950-51 to 21.8% in 2005-06), and

medicine (16.3% in 1950-51 to 46.7% in 2005-06).

Education Opportunities for Women in India

14. (U) Nandita Singh, Reader, Department of Education, Punjab University, discusses the disparity in educational and employment opportunities for women in India in her 2008 article "Higher Education for Women in India-Choices and Challenges" published by the Forum on Public Policy in 2008. According to Dr. Singh, poor and rural females have difficulty accessing educational opportunities which has led to a long standing, well documented gender gap. The reasons for the disparities are a result of cultural, social, and economic factors. She says that, while more families have begun to value girls as much as boys, there remain overwhelming cultural and economic reasons why female children do not receive the same medical, emotional and educational attention as males. In many families, girls are seen as burdens, the bearers of exorbitant dowries who will eventually leave the family. Accordingly, less attention is paid to developing a female's potential and more to the essential goals of a female's life: matrimony and motherhood. Thus, any education these girls receive will be in preparation of marriage.

15. (U) Dr. Singh says educational opportunities for women are the highest in urban areas where there is an awareness of gender issues among the educated sections of society. According to Dr. Singh, today the urban middle and upper classes take higher education for women for granted, although they may not view education as linked to a career. Nevertheless, women in these urban centers have greater

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employment opportunities and are increasingly present in many former male bastions. Today in India, women are pilots, heads of multi-national corporations, doctors, filmmakers, chefs, and engineers. However, according to Dr. Singh, there is little reason to celebrate as the number of women who have been not been able to access education and employment opportunities far outweighs the number of women who have accessed them.

The Women of Four Delhi Institutions of Higher Education

16. (U) The Lady Shri Ram College for Women and Miranda House, part of the Delhi University system, are top tier women's colleges in India and both have student bodies in excess of two thousand students. Women who have attended these colleges often turn out to be leaders in their field. For example, Miranda House alumnae include Sheila Dikshit, the Chief Minister of Delhi, and Mira Nair, Filmmaker, while Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy in Myanmar is a graduate of Lady Shri Ram. Kamla Nehru, also a women's college that is part of Delhi University, while respected, is not at the same level as the two above colleges. Approximately one thousand six hundred women make up Kamla Nehru's student body. Jamia Millia Islamia, established by Muslim nationalists as a secular coeducational university, is highly regarded and a number of foreign dignitaries have visited it over the years (Marshal Tito in 1954, King Zahir Shah of Afghanistan in 1955, Crown Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and King Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran in 1956). Its student body, men and women, numbers above ten thousand.

17. (SBU) Econoff spoke to the principals of Lady Shri Ram, Miranda House, Kamla Nehru, and the Dean of Social Work at Jamia Millia Islamia about the makeup of their female student body. According to these educators, their students come from all over India and include a percentage of women from the scheduled tribe/scheduled caste populations as required by law. The educators described their students as hard workers with parents who supported their decision to study, otherwise the students never would have made it to tertiary education in the first place. They also said most of their students were economically middle class or higher, regardless of caste. They added that the students who had the hardest time adjusting to life at their institutions, and needed the most help, were the poorest students, again, regardless of caste. As a result, the institutions adopted measures, like special study groups, to

help these students adjust as quickly as possible.

Changing Attitudes, Opportunities, and Choices

¶8. (SBU) When asked if the educators had noticed any changes in their students in recent years, all four said that today the majority of women at their institutions saw their bachelor's degrees as stepping stones to a job or to continued education. Previously, though there had always been exceptions, college was something women did to prepare themselves for marriage or for work that would not take too much time away from marriage, like teaching. Though the educators said some students still made the choice to forgo a profession in favor of marriage, the number had decreased. They said this had to do with economic reasons as much as it did for a desire for self satisfaction and independence. Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, the Principal of Lady Shri Ram College told Econoff that only one student in her graduating class had said she was choosing marriage over career or further studies. Dr. Gopinath said she had expected a few more of her students to make a similar choice and believed her students' choices were indicative of the changes in Indian society.

¶9. (SBU) Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath and Dr. Prabibha Jolly, Miranda House's Principal, said another difference in their past and present students, was that their current students were filled with hope. They saw their futures as filled with opportunities, not limitations. Their current students believed that they could change things in a way that previous students had not, and further believed they could do anything they wanted. The two Principals found their students' optimism inspiring though they expressed to Econoff that the realities of India's patriarchal society combined with the

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difficulties associated with achieving high aspirational goals would likely limit what some of their students were in fact able to achieve. Dr. Anjali Gandhi, Dean of Social Sciences at Jamia Millia Islamia, said a change she noted was the parents of her students, while still holding sway over what their children studied, encouraged their daughters to get the best education they could. This was especially true of mothers who recognized education was the means to a better life for their daughters. Dr. Minoti Ghattejee, Principal of Kamala Nehru College, presented a less rosy picture of her students' beliefs. Dr. Chatterjee said her students still felt the weight of India's patriarchal society and some of them felt that males received better treatment and had more opportunities than they did. Dr. Chatterjee did believe, however, that her students had more opportunities than female students had 10 years ago.

¶10. (SBU) Another change the educators observed was increasing numbers of their female students striving to get through their educations faster so they could enter the workforce sooner. As a result, classes that were geared toward a profession were becoming more popular like finance, journalism, and human resource management. The educators also stated that while opportunities for their students had improved, they did not believe all women in India fared as well. They also believed it was their job to help shape their students into the type of women that could succeed in a society that, despite increasing opportunities, remained patriarchal and fraught with challenges. The educators felt that they were succeeding in this goal, as evidenced by their students placement in jobs or advancement to postgraduate education and then employment, but their work was far from over.

¶11. Comment: (U) More Indian women are accessing higher education than ever before and they are choosing to study subjects that were once male bastions. A gender gap still exists, but for those women who make it to tertiary institutions like Lady Shri Ram, Miranda House, Jamia Millia Islamia and Kamla Nehru, they can obtain the skills necessary to access the opportunities such education provides. College for women in these schools is not merely a staging ground before marriage but a path to independence and a better life.

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